

# NEW ZEALAND ASSOCIATION FOR RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

## TE HUNGA RANGAHAU MĀTAURANGA O AOTEAROA

# Sutton-Smith Doctoral Award, 2006

**PhD Thesis Title:** *The role of emotion in children's learning task engagement in the elementary school classroom.*

The inaugural recipient of the Brian Sutton-Smith award for excellence in a PhD thesis in education is Veronica Mary Enright O'Toole of the University of Canterbury.

In this ground-breaking study, Veronica set out to investigate the emotions and moods of 61 Year 5 and 6 children as they engaged in a variety of learning tasks in science and social studies. To generate her data, she made use of a wide range of research techniques, including audio and video recordings, regular observations, interviews, and case studies, and her analyses made good use of several advanced statistical procedures. Her competence in theory and methodology showed the clear benefits of her extensive training in psychology, while her perceptive comments and quotations about the feelings and attitudes of her subjects revealed a natural affinity for children.

Veronica's intelligent use of the modified experience sampling tool made an important contribution to research methods in this field, and the findings she generated about the emotional correlates of successful learning experiences will surely have significant spin-off effects for classroom practice. Amongst her other conclusions, Veronica was able to reveal much about the structure of children's emotions and their associated gender differences. She proposed a useful model of decision-making in the contexts she studied. Her explanation of how classroom events shape children's emotions through an accumulation of similar experiences was the result of much painstaking attention to detail, and represents an important insight.

Throughout her thesis, Veronica's excitement about her research was repeatedly obvious, and her forays into new issues opened up by her investigations indicated a commendable attitude of curiosity which should carry her far in future research endeavours. Just like Abby, one of her young subjects reported, she was proud of her work on the space topics, "because it was fun doing it". Professor Sutton-Smith would surely be impressed by these qualities, as he displayed a similar interest in the spontaneity of children at play. Furthermore, the late Professor Graham Nuthall, who was the first supervisor of Veronica's work, would have been delighted with the final outcome of her efforts, in what is a challenging area of research.

In short, the diversity of Veronica's strengths promises well for her future career. The NZARE Council believes her to be a very worthy recipient of the Brian Sutton-Smith Award.



**Veronica Mary Enright O'Toole**  
University of Canterbury

**NZARE**